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Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc.



Australasian Grebes
photo - Noel Young

Grey Box-dominated Grassy Woodlands – A Threatened Community

By Chris Timewell

The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999* is commonwealth legislation that includes a list of species and communities considered to be threatened at the national level. Since its inception, numerous species have been added to the threat lists under this Act. Less regularly, threatened ecological communities are added. The lower number of listed ecological communities (compared to the number of listed threatened species) is due at least partially to the difficulties involved in demonstrating that a community is a real entity, and not just a collection of species that happen to be at the same location. The process of identifying communities under the EPBC Act is separate to the Victorian Ecological Vegetation Class (EVC) system for classifying types of native vegetation.

On the 1st April 2010, a new community was added to the EPBC Act list - *Grey Box (Eucalyptus microcarpa) Grassy Woodlands and Derived Native Grasslands of South-eastern Australia*. The status of this community under the Act is 'endangered', which means that it is facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild in the near future. I experience mixed emotions when reading about new species or communities being added to an officially recognised threat list. Part of me is upset that the environment has been, and continues to be, badly managed and damaged by humans to the point of placing species and communities at the risk of extinction. However, there is also some cautious optimism that their listing will provide them with greater protection from damaging activities, and will possibly lead to better management and recovery.

Grey Box (Eucalyptus microcarpa) Grassy Woodlands and Derived Native Grasslands of South-eastern Australia was considered to be 'endangered' on the basis of *criterion 4 'Reduction in community integrity'*:

The change in integrity experienced by the ecological community as indicated by the loss of vegetative components, faunal components, weed invasion, the degree of fragmentation and the degradation of habitat values is severe. The nature of the changes in integrity, within the ecological community, are such that the regeneration of many patches is unlikely to occur within the near future, even with positive human intervention. Therefore, the ecological community is eligible for listing as endangered under this criterion. (DEWHA 2010, page 37).

Interesting reports on extent of this community, its characteristic plants and animals and the relevant threatening processes to this community are available at the following website:

(<http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/sprat/public/publicshowcommunity.pl?id=86&status=Endangered>).

The key diagnostic features of this community are provided in the dot points below (from DEWHA 2010, pages 6 and 7), but there are also other strict criteria that must be met before the occurrence of this community can be confirmed (see Table 1 in DEWHA 2010):

1. The ecological community occurs on low slopes and plains from central NSW, through northern and central Victoria into South Australia. Disjunct occurrences are known from near Melbourne and in the Flinders-Lofty Block Bio-region of South Australia.
2. The vegetation structure of the ecological community is typically a woodland to open forest.
3. The tree canopy is dominated ($\geq 50\%$ canopy crown cover) by *Eucalyptus microcarpa* (Grey Box).
4. Other (specified) tree species may be present in the canopy and, in certain circumstances, may be co-dominant with Grey Box but are never dominant on their own.
5. The mid layer comprises shrubs of variable composition and cover, from absent to moderately dense. The mid layer usually has a crown cover of less than 30% with local patches up to 40% crown cover.
6. The ground layer also is highly variable in development and composition, ranging from almost absent to mostly grassy to forb-rich. Ground layer flora commonly present include one or more of the graminoid genera: *Austrodanthonia*, *Austrostipa*, *Elymus*, *Enteropogon*, *Dianella* and *Lomandra*; and one or more of the chenopod genera: *Atriplex*, *Chenopodium*, *Einadia*, *Enchylaena*, *Maireana*, *Salsola* and *Sclerolaena*.
7. Derived grasslands are a special state of the ecological community, whereby the canopy and mid layers have been mostly removed to $<10\%$ crown cover but the native ground layer remains largely intact, with 50% or more of the total vegetation cover being native.

Grey Box (Eucalyptus microcarpa) Grassy Woodlands and Derived Native Grasslands of South-eastern Australia is likely to occur in the local area. Within the Goldfields Bio-region (which encompasses the majority of the Mt Alexander Shire), the EVCs that may correspond to this nationally threatened community include

Plains Grassy Woodland (EVC 55), Alluvial Terraces Herb-Rich Woodland (EVC 67), Grassy Woodland (EVC 175) and Plains Woodland/Herb-rich Gilgai Wetland Mosaic (EVC 235) and Plains Woodland (EVC 803) (From DEWHA 2010, pages 13 and 14). However, this will depend upon the composition of plant species present within each example of these EVCs, and particularly the presence and abundance of Grey Box.

Perhaps a future project for the Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club could be to map the extent of this threatened community in the local area?

Reference:

Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts (DEWHA)(2010). *'Advice to the Minister for Environment Protection, Heritage and the Arts from the Threatened Species Scientific Committee (the Committee) on an Amendment to the List of Threatened Ecological Communities under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)'* From the EPBC Act website (<http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/communities/pubs/86-listing-advice.pdf>), Accessed 4 August 2010.

An Unusual Visitor

George Broadway

We have a friend, widowed a few years ago who lives in Daylesford, on a hill, not far from the Hospital. She recently downsized to a smaller house and left her cherished garden to start all over again on a bare block, bare that is apart from some weeds like blackberries for which she needed assistance to remove.

The bare block has been transformed into an attractive suburban back garden with some lawn, flower and vegetable beds. She has also many plants in pots near her back door, many of which are waiting to be planted out in the garden.

Recently she informed us that she has been visited regularly while working in the garden, up to several times a day. A visitor which she would very much like us to meet, knowing my interest in birds. She having identified the visitor as a Buff-banded Rail. Yesterday we found ourselves unexpectedly passing through Daylesford so decided to pay a visit, and to invite our friend out for a coffee. However while filling the kettle she said she would like us to stay for a cup of tea, hoping that her visitor would put in an appearance. She remarked that she had found that it had a liking for sesame seeds, having shaken out the tablecloth outside the back door. So as there were more sesame seeds on the tablecloth she shook them out on the path outside the door.

Sure enough, before the tea was poured the bird put in an appearance, I didn't see it fly in; it simply materialised among the vegies. As if it knew something it made a bee-line for the area where the seeds had been distributed and began picking them up. From time to time it appeared startled by other birds, such as two Grey Currawongs, but resumed seed gathering after reassuring itself that all was well.



Finally however, for no apparent reason it stood bolt upright, then took off running to disappear again among the vegetables. Obviously something had spooked it.

I tried to photograph it but as I didn't want to spook it by opening the door, I took photos through the glass of the door, so the quality is less than it might have been.

Yamba and the Long Way Home – part 2

Rita Mills

After our time in Yamba I wanted to come home taking a rather long way round. I wanted to see some of the semi-desert country I enjoyed earlier, after the rain and floods, so we headed north and west, taking in the mountains between Casino and Tenterfield, the river valley from Tenterfield to Texas, and Goondiwindi, to the plains of South west Queensland as far as Thargominda at the edge of the Channel Country.

When we left Yamba I recorded that it was "cold, showery and overcast" - Yamba according to the locals, recorded its lowest ever temperature while we were there, 13! We headed north for Casino, and then through the mountains, calling in at a little place, Mallanganee, where there was the chance of seeing Glossy Black Cockatoos. Unfortunately they weren't there this time, but there were still quite a number of birds around where we had our cuppa near the park. I'd recommend a slight deviation off the highway to call into this little township. I think there's a pub, there's certainly a cafe, and there's still an old lady selling her very nice home-made pies in her funny little shop in the front rooms of her house - and there's the birds, too, of course. Some of those we saw were White-necked Heron, Satin Bowerbirds, (females and juveniles) and Blue-faced Honeyeaters, along with 10+ other species - and we were there for about 20 minutes. We stayed overnight at Tenterfield and felt very much at home when we woke to a white frost!

From Tenterfield we started heading west, along the valley of the Dumaresque River, which was all new to us. I started seeing more birds, still mainly familiar species, though. We often saw Pied Butcherbirds, and when we crossed over the river into Queensland and had our lunch in

Texas, we were joined by a young one, which sat on the end of our picnic table while one of the parents watched anxiously from the ground next to me. At Yetman we saw Common Mynahs, to my disgust. Just before Bogabilla we spotted a number of Cattle Egrets in the paddocks with cattle.

After Goondawindi we really began to find ourselves in the native pine country, and because of the rains and floods, there was grass everywhere, mostly drying off. We stopped at a little place called Tabeah for afternoon tea, and beside BBBs (Big Black Birds), which I thought were crows that time, there were Yellow-throated Miners, Masked Lapwings, Cockatiels, and Red-winged Parrots, and I suppose I ought also admit, Sparrows and 30+ Common Mynahs.

That night we stayed in St George, and next day began seeing lots of birds, including Emus (we saw quite a few this trip), Apostlebirds, and more Willie Wagtails. At Ballon, where we stopped for lunch, I recorded Blue-faced and White-plumed Honeyeaters, a White-faced Heron fishing from the culvert, Willie Wagtails, Grey-crowned Babblers, Spotted Bowerbirds, Mudlarks, Crested Pigeons, Galahs, Australian Raven, and Sparrows, all these over about 1/2 an hour spent in the centre of a small township which was under water for two weeks back in March.

When we stopped at the side of the road for a cuppa about 50kms east of Cunnamulla I realized that we were being eyed off rather superciliously by two Emus about 20 feet away at the other side of a fence. As they stalked off, feeding as they went, lots of little birds flew up from the shrubs and grass at their feet, but I didn't manage to identify them as they dived straight back into the low bushes again. Just before Cunnamulla we at last saw Major Mitchell Cockatoos, then a Wedgetail, Red-winged Parrots, and an Echidna trundling along the side of the road, then a flock of White Ibis (we often saw Straw-necked Ibis) more Galahs, Kestrels, a Swamp Harrier, Black-shouldered Kites, and I was really beginning to feel my trip the long way home was really justified.

After our night in Cunnamulla we headed off to Thargominda, via Nine-mile Bore, Eulo and Lake Bindigolly. I stopped when there looked to be a promising spot where birds were bathing in a puddle at the side of the road, and found that there were Bourkes Parrots, which didn't stay very long, Zebra Finches, Diamond Doves and Ringneck Parrots and half a kilometre on I heard a Crested Bellbird and numerous other calls, but couldn't identify any. Frustrating.

Nine-mile Bore had the reputation of being a really good bird spot, and several years ago I saw Halls Babblers there, but the last couple of visits yielded almost nothing as it was dry. But this year there was a pair of Red-

capped Robins, which I suspected by the behaviour had a nest nearby, the desert race of the Rufous Whistler, Willie Wagtails, Jacky Winters, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Zebra Finches, Diamond Doves, Brown Tree-creepers, White-winged Trillers, a babbler species I didn't get a good look at, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters, another honeyeater I couldn't identify, and a quite close encounter with a Crested Bellbird. I even found an Emu Bush, *Eremophylla maculata*, the same tangled form as the one I have in the garden.

At the river crossing at Eulo there were scores of Fairy Martins whirling overhead and going under the road-bridge with beaks full of mud, White-necked Herons and Great Egrets fishing almost side by side, Nankeen Night-herons, Little Friarbirds, several Black Kites, White-plumed Honeyeaters, and Peaceful Doves.

I'll have to leave the last part 'til next month.

India – 1940

Tony Morton

I recently again came across my father's 1939 'Shooting License', issued to him in Simla by the Punjab Government under the 'Wild Birds and Wild Animals Protection Act 1933'. I thought members might be interested to hear about how, from our 'superior' view in 2010, the British Raj regarded the extraordinary wealth of wildlife that existed in the Subcontinent at the time, and, I hope, still does exist.

I believe that the population of India (which then included Pakistan and Bangladesh, of course) was then, in 1940, about six hundred million people. Now, of course, eighty years later, the population of India, alone, is one point two billion. Double! I remember that there was a huge celebration in India only a few years ago when they reached the 'magic' total of one billion! How good are you on exponential growth?!

The Tiger was even then, in 1940, protected and so not on my father's Shooting License list, though he could have shot the eight other species of *Felis*, wolves, jackals, bears, mongoose, buck, other antelope, sheep and deer, fruit bats, hyenas, squirrels, and the whole family of *Mus*. But he only had a shotgun and only shot game birds 'for the pot'.

We would spend Christmas in the country, in a 'dak' (postal service) bungalow, and my father would shoot a peacock for Christmas dinner. This was roasted and brought out from the kitchen to much applause, tail feathers displayed in a great fan. Most of the time we watched the birds, however, and observed different species of green pigeon (*Crocopus phoenicopterus*) in the fig trees,

and other 'game' birds (not that we saw them all!): six species of pheasant other than *Pavo cristatus*, eight species of pigeon, six sandgrouse, four bustards, eight partridges, four different quail or button quail, not to mention four swans, twenty-eight species of teal, duck, pochard and widgeon, six species of goose and two cranes. Some species were not in our immediate area of course, but, even in our Delhi garden, there were always 'Peroquets', Scarlet Minervets, Golden Orioles, two sorts of Paradise Flycatcher and Baya Weaver Birds to watch.

In case you feel that we were monstrously 'gung ho' in that shooting was acceptable, I must point out that it was usually 'for the pot' and that, even if the hunter was after animal trophies, only the old males (as they had the best 'heads') were stalked and the fine for shooting any female was 'one gold mohur' (which you can sometimes rarely see as a valuable pendant nowadays). It 'was not done' to leave a wounded animal or bird and all game had to be stalked on foot (unless you were pig-sticking!). No birds could be shot during their nesting time (end March to beginning September, depending on the species).

Enormous disgruntlement was occasioned when the Americans arrived and went out in jeeps to mow down dozens of Blackbuck with their tommy guns, as you can imagine!

I remember that one day we went out with a friend who shot a magnificently horned Blackbuck. The Muslim shikaris, yelling with delight, raced out to cut the beast's throat before it was fully dead so that they could pronounce it halal and they could therefore eat it.

I haven't mentioned the butterflies! Suffice it to say, their numbers and beauty started me off on a lifetime's interest! I still have a couple of dozen specimens that I collected in Simla and Delhi, and I have my father's Shooting License, if anyone would like to have a look at the list of species mentioned in it.

A week in Arnhemland – birding.

Chris Morris

The wet season through to May saw exceptionally high rainfall this year, almost double the average for a decade. As a result the landscape for the region was green and this posed difficulties as parts of the Tomkinson flood plains were impassable to local drivers with FWD vehicles. Many billabongs were still covered in dense rushes making it treacherous under foot, without the thought of hidden salt water crocodiles when looking for Magpie Geese and Jacanas.

Arnhemland is the largest Aboriginal Land Reserve in Australia with the Nature Lodge a joint venture offering a rich bird life along the tidal rivers, tropical grassy plains, sandstone country, mangrove estuaries, and offshore coral keys.

Day One: Crater Lakes special sightings

Wandering Whistling Duck, Green Pygmy Goose, Black necked-Stork, Brahminy Kite, Bush Stone-curlew, eight species of Terns, Buff-banded Rail, Chestnut Rail (very rare), Red-tailed Cockatoo, Red-winged Parrot, Masked Finch, Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, Gouldian Finch. Other Finches Masked and Long Tailed noted but the highlight was the Northern Territory Hooded Parrot, now low in numbers but well-known for nesting in Termite Mounds, all too easy for trappers

Day Two

Various types of Termite mounds aside from the magnetic north/south ones taking advantage of day and night heating and cooling. The queen termite tends to live for over 30 years eating different woods inside the tree. Woollybutt trees and Darwin Stringy-bark are cut off, then peeled away about ten feet up for bark paintings. Yellow orange grevillia bush foliage and pinky mauve calytrix. Once a pine extract for the timber industry termite proofing.

18 species of Honeyeaters counted over the course of the next few days

Day Three: Blyth River flood plain.

Aboriginal guided tour by the traditional owners. Driving across the grasslands flushed out native birds Brown Quail, Burdekin Duck, Striated Heron, Rufous Night Heron, Australian Hobby, Diamond Doves, Bar-shouldered Doves, Peaceful Doves (constantly calling - the sign of the outback), Varied Lorikeet, Red-collared Lorikeet, Broadbilled Flycatcher, Great Bower Bird, Six species of Kingfishers.

Day Four

Learnt there was something like 15 language groups at the community settlement of **Maningrida**. Dried grassfires and scrub still smouldering at night. For no reason apparently just at random and nothing better to do.

Day Five: The Cadell River

Cruise passed Crocodiles hauled up on the mud-banks to the river mouth, gently sliding into the water as the boat approaches.

Feral Asian Water Buffaloes not so visible but the country is pounded into dry pug hollows, filled with small Cane Toads pushing their way west. Special sightings included Great-billed Heron, Great Egret, Intermediate Egret and Little Egret. Some grain dependent birds down in numbers may be due to the wet conditions having an adverse effect on native grass seed production.

Day Six: The Stone Country.

Aboriginal Ranger guided Tour. Take in the cultural connections of the varied landscapes and examples of rock art. Finally found the elusive Northern Shrike-Tit - one of the top end's rarest birds.

Day Seven

Mopping up the tail enders. Estimated 500 Roseate Terns on Haul Around Island with some already in breeding plumage. The final tally for the week was 186 species out of 250 listed for the area.

The message is that while Australia's northern tropical savannahs are considered among the best preserved in the World, their biodiversity is still under threat from burning, grazing and other land management failures.

Birds in the Burbs of Brisbane

Noel Young

During August I spent three weeks in Brisbane, and while the weather wasn't as warm as you would think, it was an enjoyable break in very different surrounds. We had a couple of overnight excursions to interesting areas, namely the Bunya Mountains and the Main Range National Park, which I will outline in a later edition.

My sister has suspended bird feeders on the back porch, attracting mainly flocks of squabbling Rainbow Lorikeets, which aggressively dominate the scene, and even intimidate the cat with their loud screeching. When they can get a look in, there are visits by Galahs, SC Cockatoos, Turtledoves, Crested Pigeons and Mudlarks, while the bird bath at the front is favoured by Magpies (black backed), Noisy Miners and Blue faced Honeyeaters. It was a treat to be woken each morning by the resident Butcher-bird which could be mistaken for the postman whistling a casual tune. Occasionally he dropped in for a worm, as did the Kookaburra. My niece in a neighbouring suburb had a pair of Striated Pardalotes nesting in a retaining wall.



A Darter meditates on Forest Lake

You could hear the chicks piping inside the tunnel dug in the crevice between the boards. Paths in the local area (including corridors of native vegetation retained along creek lines) turned up species such as Black faced Cuckoo Shrike, Red Wattlebird, Pied Currawongs, and occasionally Fig-birds dining on berries.

Our favourite morning stroll is a circuit track around the local lake, and while we did this on three or four occasions, the exercise regime was somewhat compromised by my frequent stops with the binoculars as this turns out to be a good area for birds, and some opportunities to attempt photographs.

The lake was created artificially around 10 years ago, as the centre piece of a new suburban development, "Forest Lake", and a garden strip of mainly native plants and trees surrounds the

waters edge, attractive to wildlife as well as to us. Eels and turtles inhabit the lake, and recently the Water Dragon which is in plague proportions in most of Brisbane's Parks and gardens, has found its way here. Many of the common water birds are found, and the surrounds attract a variety of urban adapters.

My list for the Lake:

E. Swamphen	Australasian Coot	Dusky Moorhen	Pacific Black Duck
Wood Duck	White eyed Duck	L Pied Cormorant	L Black Cormorant
Darter	Australasian Grebe	Mallard	Willy Wagtail
Little Corella pr.	Rainbow Lorikeets	S. Blue Wren	Raven sp
Magpie	Mudlark	Grey Fantail	Welcome Swallow
Crested Pigeon	Brown Honeyeater	Noisy Friarbird	Noisy Miner

On my last visit exactly two years ago, I recorded a family of Cotton Pygmy Geese (4 young with adults), Pelicans, White Egret and Nankeen Night Heron on the lake. But not this time.



Above: Water Dragon, Forest Lake

Right: Lake Wivenhoe, Brisbane's principal water storage dam, is now full following this year's substantial rain.



Thank you to the contributors who answered my plea for more articles last month. I decided to make this a larger edition and not hold any over, as the next couple of editions will include our spring activities. - Ed.

From the August Business meeting:

Discussions included 1> Photo point project – Ern Perkins explained the need to revise the work done some 10 years ago and to re-photograph the same points to record changes in vegetation. It is now also desirable to digitise the original paper information and photos. Committee will check the possibility of a grant for this work.

2> Plan to revamp and enhance the club's website – Chris Timewell has expressed an interest in facilitating a considerable upgrade, which could eventually incorporate an archive of records and photos among other things.

3> The plant brochure is proving to be very popular, and already there are suggestions for another, or to put the many unused photos on the new website

Observations

- ◆ Over Swift Parrot Survey weekend 8/8/10, I went out to Pullans Road Maldon, Sandy Creek Road Maldon, Red White & Blue Track, Gully Track Welshmans Reef, Mia Mia Track Newstead, and Erin Court Muckleford and got Swifties at every site - Debbie Worland
- ◆ 12th August on Mt Alexander I watched a Wedge tailed Eagle soaring majestically along the western face, and found *Pimelia* sp. and *Hardenbergia violacea* in flower as well as millions of Early Nancies. On the Taradale club walk close to the channel behind the town the following was in flower – *Acacia dealbata*, *lanigera*, *pycnantha*, *aculeatissima*, *aspera*, *paradoxa*, *gunnii*, *Pterostylis melagramma*, *Grevillea alpina*, *Leucopogen* sp, *Hardenbergia*, *Hovea heterophylla* - Richard Piesse
- ◆ Yellow tufted Honeyeaters are numerous at home recently; and one only Eastern Spinebill – Nigel Harland
- ◆ Rita Mills regrets that numerous Wattlebirds are once again driving away many passerines, and also notes that there is water in Bells Swamp for the first time in years.
- ◆ Fan-tailed Cuckoo calling in the vicinity of the house last two weeks - and some visitors most mornings (photo) - Denis Hurley
- ◆ 31st Aug: Rita has received a report of a Sea Eagle at Lannacoorie Res.
- ◆ A dense grouping of Nodding Greenhoods *Pterostylis nutans*, August 13, Poverty Gully Reservoir Track, on the water race that leads into the Eureka Mine, on the south side of the Track. There were hundreds in an area about 20 metres by 10 metres (photo) - Barbara Guerin



Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme

September 2010

Fri September 10 meeting: MALCOM CALDER "South America - Cook, Banks and Darwin".

Sat September 11 field trip: Sales Track, Wattle Flat

September 15 Wednesday Wildflower Walks commence (4pm for 1 hr) and continue on Sept 22, Sept 29, Oct 6 and Oct 13

Fri October 8 meeting: GRAEME WATSON on Frogs

Sat October 9 field trip: Tamsin Byrnes' property, Sutton Grange*

*NOTE early start time – 11am at the Duke St car park.

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the car park opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at Denis Hurley's; 20 Merrifield St., at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

Subscriptions for 2010

Ordinary membership: Single \$27, Family \$35

Pensioner or student: Single \$24, Family \$29

Subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, Castlemaine Naturalist

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